How to Talk to Your Tween

Learn when and how to approach your prickly preteen.

By Scholastic Parents Staff

Last week, your 6th grader laughed at your jokes, asked your opinion on what clothes to wear, and didn’t mind kissing you goodbye before school every morning. But today, every comment you throw her way elicits, at best, a one-word response accompanied by plenty of eye rolls. A
simple question about her weekend plans can send her into an all-out meltdown. What happened to the warm, loving connection you had just last week? Here’s what’s going on with your middle schooler, and how to communicate better with her on a regular basis:

**The Tween Brain**

The brain develops from back to front, which means the part of the brain that helps adolescents reason, plan ahead, and manage impulses (the prefrontal cortex) is one of the last areas to mature. It doesn’t happen until around age 25!

An adult brain processes verbal cues — tone of voice, facial expression, gestures — in the prefrontal cortex, but adolescents process these cues in the anger center of the brain, or amygdala. In addition, the part of the brain that manages emotional urges is under construction. This explains why preteens may interpret a parent’s normal tone of voice as yelling.

**Prepare Yourself**

Start by making sure both you and your child have had enough sleep. Middle schoolers need between 9 1/4 and 10 hours of sleep a night. Go into a conversation consciously choosing to connect with her and to focus on what she is saying and feeling. Try to understand her emotions, because being empathetic will make her feel more inclined to talk to you, and keep your own emotions in check.

If her story makes you want to yell or get angry, take a breath, pause, and try again to understand her point of view so you can understand what she experienced, and ask questions until you get it. Take a break if necessary, but be clear that you are not angry with her and that you want to revisit the topic when you are both calmer. Give your preteen the respect of your full attention. Avoid doing things like paying bills or checking your email when you’re talking to her.

**Seize Your Moment**

After school, at bedtime, in the car, and while working side by side preparing a meal are great times to engage your preteen, because these opportunities allow for less intense, more relaxed connection. Engaging in fun activities together is another great opportunity to talk. Go for a walk or bike ride together after dinner, go bowling, or plan a weekend ski trip.

Connecting with just one child is difficult when the whole family is together, so invite your preteen to go for a quick walk while Dad clears the dinner table. If you have younger kids, put them to bed earlier than your preteen. Once they’re asleep, devote some time to your tween. It will be easier for her to open up with just one parent at a time.

**Draw In an Introvert**

Take cues from your preteen, and do not force a conversation if he is clearly not ready or interested in talking. Think about whether he is an introvert or an extrovert, then approach him in a way most likely to yield a meaningful conversation. If he gives you curt answers to simple
questions, he is probably an introvert (or angry about something) and will not respond if you force a conversation.

Try to create plenty of one-on-one situations — during dinner or at bedtime — to connect with your introvert. Email may be a good way to connect with an introvert. If your preteen talks your ear off without prompting, she is probably an extrovert and is more comfortable talking with you anytime.

Conversation Starters
Ask your preteen to explain something that she is an expert on. Avoid questions which invite monosyllabic responses. If your preteen plays soccer, say something like, "I am confused about the referee’s call in today’s game. Will you explain?"

You also can connect with your preteen via TV, movies, or books. For instance, ask a question about one of the characters. You may learn something about your preteen, based on her opinions about a particular television character or plot, that you can explore after the show is over. Watch the evening news with her and after, for instance, a story on violence, ask a question like, "That person sounds violent. Is there anyone scary like that at your school?"